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ABSTRACT

A multiyear, multiage experience, combined with what is known about collaborative learning, learning styles, and multiple intelligences, grouping practices, and the success of inclusion in such a setting, promises to give all children a real opportunity for success in the classroom. Many schools have implemented multiage programs successfully, but other programs have been rushed into without proper planning, and with requirements that conflict with the spirit of multiage practices. This book shows the potential pitfalls of implementing and conducting a multiage program, and tells how to avoid them. It discusses planning, staff development, student selection, parental involvement, inclusion, specialists in the multiage classroom, and many other issues that, handled properly, will make a multiage program a success. The book is a response to concerns expressed by teachers and offers advice to those educators faced with creating a new multiage program, and to those already in a program and struggling to make it work. The first part of the book offers brief discussions of over 30 basic concepts that should be considered when implementing multiage programs. The second part provides a short list of resources, including organizations, newsletters, and conferences. The last part contains a bibliography of over 190 items. (TJQ)

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Our Best Advice

The Multiage Problem Solving Handbook

Written by
Jim Grant
Bob Johnson
Irv Richardson

PS 024638

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Our Best Advice

The Multiage Problem Solving Handbook

Written by
Jim Grant
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Dedication

To Bill Page, former superintendent of the Conval School District in Peterborough, New Hampshire — the single most child-centered superintendent in the world. He championed developmentally appropriate education by truly valuing the uniqueness of each child in his district. He was our state's most outspoken teacher advocate!

— Jim Grant

To Larry Seavey, a former assistant superintendent of schools, who greatly influenced me both as a teacher and as an elementary school principal. Larry believed that each child must be actively involved in his own learning, and that learning needs to be hands-on, with a myriad of learning materials available, and giving each child freedom of movement and an opportunity to interact with classmates and teachers. Working with Larry was a once-in-a-career opportunity, for which I am deeply appreciative.

— Bob Johnson

To Bob Lyman, a superintendent who remains a child-centered, "outdoor educator" at heart and in spirit. His excitement about new ideas and about finding innovative and better ways to teach students serves as an inspiration.

— Irv Richardson

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Thank you —

To our band of perceptive SDE multiage presenters: Stephanie Noland, Jan and Dave Ulrey, Louise Wrobleski, Diana Mazzuchi, and Ellen Thompson; who acted as our eyes and ears, who listened to teachers around the country and brought back invaluable information that helped bring great focus to this book;

To editor Aldene Fredenburg, a talented wordsmith, who brought her fervent wish for a quality education for all children to this book, and edited the book with great enthusiasm and zeal;

To Gretchen Goodman, who provided us with specific, valuable information on the warning signs of a possible need for special intervention for a child;

To Lillian Grant, who took lots of handwritten notes and turned them into a neatly typed manuscript, ready for editing;

And to all the multiage teachers around the United States, who shared their successes and failures, their aspirations and concerns, with us, and are the reason for this book.

Introduction

Multiage education is the most dramatic concept to come along — again — in 150 years. It has the potential to completely change the way education is delivered to young people in this country. A multiyear, multiage experience, combined with what we now know about collaborative learning, learning styles and multiple intelligences, grouping practices, and the success of inclusion in such a setting, promises to give all children, from all walks of life, a real opportunity for success in the classroom.

But, as the saying goes, "The devil is in the details." Many excellent ideas have appeared on the education horizon only to fail, not because the basic concepts were flawed, but because the ideas were implemented too quickly, without careful thought, and without proper preparation and training.

This book shows you the potential pitfalls of implementing and conducting a multiage program, and tells you how to avoid them. It discusses planning, staff development, student selection, parental involvement, inclusion, specialists in the multiage classroom, and many other issues that, handled properly, will make your multiage program a big success; handled badly, these same issues can sink your program and jeopardize your job.

We authors are all former teachers and principals in multiage schools, and have developed multiage programs in our own schools. We have also collectively talked to tens of thousands of teachers around the United States and have heard wonderful stories of the success of properly implemented multiage programs, as well as horror stories about programs that turned into disasters.

A pattern has emerged. In each case where a multiage program failed, or is floundering, certain fundamental concepts have been ignored. Many programs were rushed into being without proper planning or training of staff; many were implemented but with restrictive, grade-specific curriculum requirements that conflicted with the spirit of multiage practices.

This book is the response to concerns expressed by countless teachers all over the country. It is meant as an emergency first aid kit for educators faced with creating a new multiage program, and for those who are already in a program, and are wondering why it isn't

working. It's also a collection of solid, easy-access information for teachers to share with busy administrators who may not have had the time to sufficiently focus on staff concerns.

We believe in multiage education. We don't want you to give up on it. With *Our Best Advice*, we're giving you the tools to do it right.

— *Jim Grant*
Bob Johnson
Irv Richardson

Our Best Advice

The Multiage Problem Solving Handbook

Don't Cling to Graded Practices

Since the first graded elementary school opened in 1848 in Massachusetts, the notion that students should be collected by age and placed into classrooms of specific grades has grown from an innovation for efficiency's sake to a societal norm.

The whole idea of "grade levels" has become ingrained into our societal consciousness even though the concept of "grade" has no meaning after graduation or before entrance into formal schooling.

Because much of the organization of schools is built around the idea of students being placed into grade levels and passed and failed by grade levels, it can be a challenge to reconceive school without them. Questions like, "What grade are you in?" have no meaning if you take away grade-level designations.

To do away with the idea, one must examine the core function of school, which is student learning, and then realize that organizing students into grade levels is an organizational tool and not an instructional strategy. It is possible to instruct students without grade level designations. Without grades, students must then be brought together by other criteria, such as interest, developmental level, learning styles, cooperative skills, problem-solving skills, skills reinforcement, achievement level, choice, and social reasons.

In their book, *The Nongraded Elementary School* (1987), John Goodlad and Robert Anderson show how student achievement levels vary greatly even among single-grade classrooms. Anyone who has spent time working with students in a single-grade classroom realizes that there are vast differences among the students in the room. Putting all students into a room based upon "grade level" may slightly decrease the range of achievement levels, but it does not eliminate the need to explore each student's needs and to design and implement an instructional plan that allows each child to make continuous progress.

If a district decides to implement a multiage program, then the members of that school community must be willing to reexamine their existing grade-level practices to see if those practices are based upon student need, or if the organizational structure is still the primary reason for a practice. If the students are enrolled in a multiage program, one would have to question the idea of giving students standardized achievement tests by grade level.

Since we have become accustomed to grade levels over the past century and a half, the notions of grade level and gradedness will not disappear overnight. However, in order to build instructional programs for students which are "student-centered" instead of "grade-level centered" we must continually examine the organization of school and curriculum to ensure we are focusing upon the student and not the grade level.

The column on the left side of the chart below lists some grade-specific obstacles that are important to deemphasize or eliminate if we are to create a truly developmentally appropriate multiage continuous progress classroom. Holding onto the practices and keeping them in place make it extremely difficult to reach your goal of "less" gradedness.

Grade-Specific Practices	Nongraded Practices
Grade-specific textbooks	Wide range of trade books and other supplemental materials
Group standardized achievement testing	Authentic assessment and evaluation
Comparative reporting (A-B-C-D-F)	Alternative reporting, i.e., narratives, checklists, etc.
Retention, promotion, grade skipping, and social promotion policies	Continuous progress practices; additional time available
Grade-specific basal readers	Wide range of trade books and other supplemental materials and reading strategies
Grade-specific curriculum content	Curriculum content is more broad-based
Time-on-task; time is the constant	Learning time is the variable
Long-term tracking by ability level	Flexible grouping (by needs for a specific purpose for short terms)
Competition among unlike learners	Cooperative atmosphere

Our Best Advice

If you are being asked to implement a multiage classroom and simultaneously continue all existing graded practices, we suggest you wait until there is agreement among stakeholders to remove or deregulate graded barriers to make it possible to attain your goal of creating a continuous progress classroom.

Build a Broad Base of Support When Adopting Multiage Education

Teachers encourage and support their students' learning by helping them improve while celebrating their accomplishments with them. The teacher continually provides encouragement, feedback and offers suggestions.

The **principal's** role must parallel the teacher's role in supporting the multiage, nongraded, continuous progress classroom: by providing teachers opportunities to learn developmentally appropriate methods; by periodically monitoring the implementation process; and by praising teachers' efforts at risk taking, while offering timely feedback and suggestions.

The principal must find ways to support all teachers, irrespective of where they are on their journey toward implementing developmentally appropriate practices. Adults as well as children learn at different speeds and in different ways. Some can learn and apply lots of information fairly quickly and independently, while others need much more support and encouragement, and a more formalized approach to learning new skills. Also, the rate at which teachers will be able to incorporate multiage practices into their classrooms will vary.

Principals themselves need support from the **superintendent** and local school board to grow professionally in their knowledge of developmentally appropriate practices and nongraded education, and in their role as facilitators of change. Too often administrators are expected to find planning time for bringing the staff together without the necessary financial resources. Without sufficient money and time it will be hard to expect any real, lasting implementation success.

The **school board** can show its support of multiage education by gaining the skills and knowledge necessary to help facilitate the change. The board should participate in all efforts related to staff development workshops, school site visits, task force committee memberships, and curriculum development meetings as well as some form of a public display of support.

Multiage classrooms deemphasize grade-level distinctions, ability grouping and comparative/competitive evaluations. The school board would do well to mirror the democratic, collaborative nature of multiage programs, substituting the hierarchy of superintendent, principal and teacher for a paradigm where everyone shares power

and supports each other as they work toward multiage, nongraded continuous progress education.

The **state departments of education** can best support multiage education by offering districts and schools incentives for change. Typically this means granting waivers and removing regulatory barriers. In plain language, they need to relax the requirement of participation in annual state-wide grade-specific accountability testing and eliminate the demand for schools to report grouping by grade levels; instead, they should allow reportings by primary and intermediate groupings to suffice.

Some states require that schools report A.D.M. (average daily membership) on a grade-by-grade basis while others consider any additional time spent in an instructional unit retention rather than continuous progress. These are outmoded practices which do not fit developmentally appropriate multiage programs.

The state departments can and should act as providers rather than enforcers. They should provide incentives and financial as well as technical assistance, disseminating information to enable districts with similar needs and interests to share resources, while encouraging local autonomy on goal setting.

Our Best Advice ✓

The multiage classroom is a major departure from the traditional school structure and therefore demands a broad base of support if it is to succeed in the present education climate. Gathering support for your ideas and goals is your first order of business.

Managing the Change to Multiage: "How Do I Get There From Here?"

Changing from a graded structure to a multiage structure involves shifting people's ideas about school. It also means implementing policies and procedures that do not rely on grade levels as a method of grouping students and as a way to organize curriculum.

Because the lock-step graded structure is such a part of how we view education, it is often difficult for people to consider "school" without specific grade levels. It is interesting to note how important grade level designation can be when describing children between the ages of five and eight. More often than not children are defined by their grade level attainment — "Jamie is a third grader," for example. The notion of grade levels becomes much less important after graduation from high school. None of us would consider asking another adult his current grade.

To begin the change to multiage, a first step is to research the topic of multiage by reading professional literature and by attending conferences and workshops. It can also be beneficial to visit schools which have successfully implemented multiage programs to discuss their change process and to examine the beliefs and structure of their multiage program.

After obtaining a solid foundation of multiage practices and philosophy, educators must work with community members to decide whether or not a multiage structure will benefit the students enrolled in that school system. If a school decides to implement a multiage program, then the members of the school community must begin to plan for the transition from a one-year, single-grade, timebound organization to a multiage continuous progress structure.

See pages 21-22 for a suggested implementation plan.

Our Best Advice ✓

Understanding and following the various elements of the change process is the beginning point for all reform efforts. The change process enables stakeholders to clearly focus on the shared vision to create multiage continuous progress programs.

Take Your Time When Implementing a Multiage Classroom

Imagine a farmer who wants to harvest his crops in a fraction of the usual time. To do this, he plants the seeds, waters them without stopping for two weeks, spends the next week weeding, fertilizes, and then harvests. It sounds silly, for we all know that it takes a certain period of time to harvest a crop — even with good agricultural practices.

Growing a good multiage program also takes time. The foundation for any good early childhood education program must be a staff that is knowledgeable about developmentally appropriate practices. With knowledge about child development, appropriate curricula and teaching strategies, and a love for children, educators have the requisite skills to implement a strong multiage program.

With a strong foundation in appropriate education and support from the school community and parents, some educators choose to implement multiage programs. The decision to implement is made by teachers, administrators, and community members. The decision is made after considerable research about multiage philosophy and multiage programs that function well. Most schools investigate the multiage philosophy for at least a year before implementing a multiage program.

Taking the time to investigate multiage, making the decision to start a multiage program, choosing the staff, making the necessary adjustments to curriculum and launching the program can take a year or more. It may take another four years to iron out wrinkles and get the program running smoothly.

Steps to Success

1. Attend an awareness session on multiage practices.
2. Present your plans to create a multiage classroom to your parent group, and invite them to participate in the process. (See pages 42-43, 51-52.)
3. Form a multiage study team to do the following:
   - Read and discuss articles, professional books, and journals, review videos and audiotapes on multiage practices.
   - Attend workshops, conferences and various staff development opportunities. (For a list of training topics, see page 23.)

4. Secure administrative, fellow staff, school board, and broad community support. (See pages 16-17, 29, and 57-58.)
5. Investigate and visit successful multiage models that would be appropriate for your community.
6. Assign willing teachers to staff the multiage classroom. (See pages 47, 48-49, 59, and 70.)
7. Budget appropriate financial resources for training, related costs, curriculum development, travel, professional books, furniture, classroom remodeling, etc. (See pages 26-27.)
8. Select a well-balanced, heterogeneous student population and secure permission from parents to include their children in the multiage classroom. (See pages 30-31, 38-39, and 40-41.)

The suggested implementation plan on pages 21-22 gives a more detailed view of the process.

Our Best Advice ✓

The more time taken to carefully plan and implement multiage practices, the greater is the likelihood of your program having longevity. The faster you implement your program the more likely you will have overlooked very important elements necessary to the program's well-being. High-speed implementation usually results in high-speed unraveling, leading to the eventual dismantling of your program.

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Plan Ahead — But Allow for Change

Peter Drucker, a prominent business management consultant, states that "planning is invaluable. Plans are useless." This quotation is a succinct way of explaining the importance of being organized and proactive when planning educational programs . . . and the difficulty of forecasting the future.

In a rapidly changing world, it's hard to predict what issues will be important in a year or two. We all have experienced the futility of trying to plan five years into the future while having to deal with one-year budgets and a rapid turnover rate among teaching staff. Although we can't plan the future, there is no substitute for developing the knowledge and process skills that will help you implement and improve a multiage program, should the opportunity arise. If you are aware of what it takes to be successful, and you have the skills to be successful, then you are much more likely to succeed.

Although no two schools go about implementing multiage programs in exactly the same manner, the following is a plan for implementation that many school districts have found successful.

A Suggested Implementation Plan

A. Create staff knowledge of developmentally appropriate practices (see pages 34, 35-36.)
   1. Knowledge about children
   2. Knowledge of appropriate curricula and experience with appropriate pedagogy
   3. Knowledge and skill about appropriate assessment
   4. Knowledge about what constitutes a strong, resilient school culture

B. Create staff and community awareness of multiage structures (see pages 42-43, 48-49.)
   1. Explore advantages and disadvantages for staff, parents, and students (see pages 23, 64-66.)
   2. Provide staff development on multiage practices
      a. Attend conferences/seminars/forums/networking groups
      b. Visit different multiage configurations
      c. Read professional literature on multiage practices

C. Make a decision about whether or not to begin a multiage program
   1. Who is responsible for the decision?
   2. Who will implement the decision?
   3. Who has the expertise/knowledge to make a good decision?
   4. Who has an interest in the outcome of the decision?

D. Organize for the multiage program
   1. Consider the transition from a one-year single grade to a multiyear/multiage program
   2. Consider staffing of the program (see pages 47 and 70.)
   3. Consider how students will be selected for the program (see pages 30-31 and 38-39.)
   4. Work with specialists to define their role in the program
   5. Consider the logistics of space, scheduling, facilities, grades to be blended, class size, etc. (see pages 24-25 and 40-41.)

E. Collect the resources necessary to instruct students
   1. Appropriate curricula
   2. Appropriate materials
   3. Appropriate assessment procedures and assessment materials
   4. Appropriate instructional teaching techniques

F. Promote the school/home partnership and community partnership (see pages 42-43 and 57-58.)
   1. Parent awareness of multiage practices
   2. Parent involvement in program design and implementation
   3. Parent participation in public relations

G. Implement the program and prepare to monitor program for adjustments (see pages 19-20.)
   1. Provide strong administrative support (see page 29.)
   2. Provide time for reflection/assessment/improvements (see page 50.)
   3. Provide for ongoing staff development (see page 23.)

— Ira Richardson, © 1995

Our Best Advice ✓

A well-articulated plan keeps your program together and assures that all stakeholders are moving in the same direction. Think of such a plan as a road map that leads us to a common destination.

Provide Adequate Staff Development

Few of us feel comfortable implementing those practices/strategies which we do not fully understand. The same is true for a teacher trying to implement a multiage classroom program. In order to initiate and maintain a successful multiage program, a teacher must have a strong foundation in the principles of child development and a high degree of knowledge about developmentally appropriate curricula and pedagogical practices. A teacher implementing a multiage classroom should also be comfortable with the following classroom practices:

- School readiness
- Teaching skills in context
- Ages and stages
- Cooperative learning
- Manipulative math
- Writing process
- Literature-based reading programs
- Developmentally appropriate practices
- Thematic teaching
- Learning centers and work stations
- Authentic assessment and evaluation
- Computer technology
- Cooperative discipline
- Multiple intelligences
- Conflict resolution
- Team teaching
- Inclusion of differently-abled children
- Responsibility training

Without the necessary foundation in child development and appropriate instructional strategies, it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a teacher to make a multiage program work. Without major curriculum modifications to allow multiage students to make continuous progress, the program will not succeed.

Our Best Advice ✓

The greater the preparation for teaching in a multiage classroom, the greater likelihood of success. We should not expect teachers to become involved in practices they have not been trained to do. Initiate a staff development plan before implementing your multiage program.

Consider Class Size

"Of course class size is important. You have to find the child before you can teach the child!"

— New Jersey Education Association

During times of declining enrollment and low school funding, increasing class size is often looked at as a harmless policy and an easy place to save money. Some school officials have been known to suddenly become motivated to create "multiage classrooms," which in reality are code words for combination or split grades.

This is a classic example of doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. A few administrators feel that class size doesn't matter in a multiage classroom, claiming there are older students to care for and teach the younger, less knowledgeable students. A well-publicized class size study from the seventies seems to be regaining popularity among "educators" who are attempting to justify their position:

> ". . . that as long as classes stay within the range of 20-40 students, reducing class size makes little difference in achievement."

The size of a multiage classroom should be approximately the same as a single-grade classroom. Keep in mind that the larger the class size, the lower the student performance on standard measures and the greater the discipline problems; the smaller the class size, the better the overall student discipline and the higher the student performance on standard measures.

Another important consideration is the state of American society and the impact on today's classrooms of the increasing numbers of children coming to school with learning difficulties, or from backgrounds of poverty or abuse. These factors, combined with the diversity of the wide age/ability and developmental range inherent in a multiage classroom, become impossible to manage if in addition the class size is too large. Meeting the needs of each student is nearly impossible in such situations.

School change must be based on what's best for students, not what's best for budgets. Large class size alone can be the undoing of a multiage classroom. School officials would do well to question the motivation of researchers, bureaucrats, and politicians claiming class size doesn't matter. We would do well to remember the words of one of America's preeminent educators and a former U.S. Education Secretary, the late Dr. Ernest Boyer. He aired his views on the subject

of class size at the April 1995 convention of the National Association of Elementary School Principals in San Diego and earned himself a standing ovation:

> "People who don't think class size matters, probably haven't been with five kids for more than three minutes in five years."

Our Best Advice

Using the multiage setting to justify increasing class size is the wrong reason to do the right thing, and may ultimately sink your program.

Be Willing to Pay for Education Reform

Education reform is a process which involves changes in human behavior. Those changes will require funds for staff development workshops, for ongoing technical support, and for purchasing of developmentally appropriate instructional materials. Other money will be necessary for refurbishing and remodeling classrooms/buildings, for visits to other sites, to cover the cost of speakers, and for release time for planning and curriculum development.

Though initially it may seem formidable to raise the additional funds, it is not impossible. Typically, the staff and administration will closely examine the current budget and expenditures. As the staff shifts from conventional practices to more developmentally appropriate practices, money may be shifted for purchasing of tradebooks, manipulatives, computer software and other supplies and materials used in active hands-on learning by students.

For example, when staff are trained in integrated language arts strategies, they will no longer need to rely on consumable workbooks and worksheets or basal texts. The money spent previously on consumables now becomes available for purchasing tradebooks, AV equipment, and other materials and supplies used by students. In some instances, teachers may find it possible to provide one or two copies of a book for a cooperative learning group, rather than needing a copy for each student in the group.

It is naive to believe that a shift to nongraded, multiage continuous progress grouping will not require additional funds. Anderson and Pavan, in their book *Nongradedness: Helping it to Happen* (1992), state, "Getting a good, authentic program started and running is at least a two- or three-year project, and completing the fine-tuning will require a number of years after that."

Budgeting the time—and allocating the money—to launch multiage nongraded continuous progress grouping are necessary steps in the process. One critical element for the budgeting of time is the development of an action plan. This becomes the vehicle for pacing and for holding accountable those responsible for implementing the new paradigm. Often the community and school board are more receptive to spending money for change when they feel that adequate time and planning are included in the action plan.

All too often teachers are actually expected to finance systemic change by foregoing pay raises, health care benefits, staff develop-

ment activities, sabbaticals and other benefits. You don't attract the support of professional educators by asking them to finance changes in the educational system!

Creating multiage, nongraded, continuous progress is not a short-term fix requiring a little pin money. As Joan Gaustad states in *Nongraded Education: Overcoming Obstacles to Implementing Multiage Classrooms* (1994):

> Maintaining nongraded education is costly. Paying teachers for additional time involved in collaborating, planning individualized instruction, and conducting qualitative assessment is costly, but necessary. Teachers will often invest immense amounts of unpaid personal time in the first few years of implementation, but few are willing or able to maintain such sacrifice on a long-term basis. Nongraded methods will gradually fall out of use if time to maintain them is not included in the school schedule.

Our Best Advice ✓

Little worth having comes for free. Multiage grouping will not survive without the allocation of both sufficient time and money. We cannot expect teachers to buy into a major education reform without appropriate funding. It is morally wrong to continue to expect teachers to finance their classroom needs out of their personal household budgets.

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Avoid Mandating Conflicting Educational Reforms

Nothing discourages teachers so much as conflicting education reforms.

Often newly adopted reforms are in complete opposition to existing education mandates. This rampant practice spreads confusion among teachers and parents, not to mention students. Most schools have a stated vision, which in turn sets an education course. When locally mandated education reforms are adopted which take the school system in the opposite direction, it can quickly derail the new reform.

The multiage continuous progress organization epitomizes developmentally appropriate education. However, confusion arises when implemented in conjunction with local conflicting graded practices such as time-on-task, mastery learning, departmentalization, standardized testing, grade specific basal adoptions, comparative reporting, and social promotion.

Inherent in conflicting education mandates are conflicting philosophical messages. Teachers are confused. They don't know which direction to go in. One teacher complained, when asked to jump on the next education band wagon, "I haven't had time to recover from the last reform!"

Staff who are willing to try teaching in a multiage classroom must be granted some form of "diplomatic immunity" and given waivers from complying with conflicting mandates. Principals are strongly urged to contact the state department of education to secure waivers on standardized testing and state mandated grade-level curriculum content. This single act can pave the way for change.

Nothing discourages a teacher more quickly than requiring him or her to simultaneously implement practices that cancel each other out. This unwelcomed classroom burden will disenfranchise teachers and sabotage efforts to make meaningful, lasting change.

Our Best Advice ✓

Our advice is plain and simple. Adopt a moratorium on conflicting mandates when implementing a new program. This is the greatest single incentive administrators can grant teachers, and a major step toward ending the pervasive confusion that exists in our schools about what educators are supposed to do.

Provide Strong Administrative Leadership

Change takes leadership. In order to move an organization from one way of doing things to another, someone must provide the vision and energy to steer the organization toward a different way of doing things.

In most cases, it is the school principal who provides the leadership as the school changes from a lock-step graded organization to a multiage continuous progress structure. The principal works with the staff to provide the time and resources necessary to study the multiage philosophy and to help make the decision about implementation. She also helps to explain the program to the school board and community members and arranges for the instructional resources and staff training needed to make the multiage program successful. To our knowledge, no education reform has ever sustained the test of time without the firm commitment and support of the building principal.

Our Best Advice ✓

If the building principal does not provide strong support, we strongly urge teachers not to embark on the journey to multiage education. Teachers should not be "out on the reform limb" by themselves.

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Beware of Creating Too Much Student Diversity Within a Multiage Setting

A major cause for the failure of many multiage classrooms is too much student diversity. The makeup of a typical multiage classroom may be a blending of two or three grade levels, four or five chronological ages, and a span of abilities from slow learners to those who are gifted, as well as a developmental age range of six or seven years. These factors alone may make the classroom setting too difficult to teach. Then on top of this normal diversity, we must consider a host of other factors:

- large class size
- too many high impact students (multiple complex problems)
- too many learning-disabled students
- children whose families are in crisis
- too many students with hidden disabilities (unidentified special-needs students)
- children of poverty
- transient students
- increased discipline problems
- drug-damaged children

A classroom with this much diversity can burn out good teachers, create a chaotic environment, anger parents, shortchange students academically, and place the principal's career at risk! It becomes almost impossible to meet the wide variety of student needs.

There are simple steps to assure that student diversity is manageable, and that the multiage classroom has a chance to succeed. These tips to control diversity should help you with this critical task of creating a manageable, teachable multiage classroom.

- class size should be the same as a single-grade classroom
- unless you are team teaching, it is best to start with blending two grades, not three. Three may be too overwhelming for even the most experienced teachers.
- the total number of handicapped students fully included in the classroom should be the same as in a single-grade classroom.

- be careful not to overload your classroom with too many high-impact students (special-needs students who have multiple problems that are very complex in nature.)

Small schools that have only one class per grade or are located in an area where the vast majority of the student population is high-needs may find this advice all but impossible to follow. If this is the case, a looping classroom configuration may be a viable alternative to a multiage classroom. (Looping involves a teacher taking his or her students from one grade level to the next, thus keeping the same students for at least two years.)

A Common Sense Guide to Multiage Practices (Grant and Johnson, 1995) covers looping; *The Looping Handbook*, by Grant, Johnson and Richardson, is due to be published in mid-1996.

Our Best Advice ✓

The fastest road to failure of the multiage classroom is to create a student population that defies quality teaching due to too much student diversity. Unmanageable diversity is the Achilles heel of the multiage classroom organization.

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Do Not Lump Multiage Education in With Waves, Trends, or Fads

Waves, trends, and fads conjure up images of temporary styles, feelings and images which disappear almost as quickly as they appear. All too often they are associated with entrepreneurs or politicians who have an interest at stake, financial or otherwise. In education, particularly, we must be leery of jumping on a bandwagon which, typically, promises to improve students' performance on standardized achievement tests.

The critical question to pose when assessing a proposed education reform is, "Who stands to benefit most from the reform?" Waves, trends, and fads tend to have the following characteristics:

- top-down initiative
- teacher-centered concept
- unfunded state or federal mandates
- designed to particularly benefit adults who don't work directly with children
- created by textbook/test publishers or other special-interest groups
- regarded as a quick financial fix.

Education reform beneficial to students can be identified as having the following elements:

- bottom-up initiative
- student-centered curriculum and instructional strategies
- local site-based decision-making process
- designed to meet the needs of *all* students
- based on developmentally appropriate practices.

Multiage grouping is based on an educationally healthy foundation of developmental appropriateness. It is nearly impossible to implement multiage grouping without being developmentally appropriate first.

Some administrators and central office personnel are inflicted with "cutting edgeitis." They want to become the first district or state to

implement a progressive education model. Some schools just plain believe that by combining grades they can realize financial savings. The tendency to jump on the newest bandwagon is less likely when a school—staff, administration and parents—have developed a shared vision. From this vision, a statement of beliefs or guiding principles is shaped into a philosophy. With a clearly articulated philosophy in place it becomes unlikely that trends and fads can wrestle the school from its mission statement.

Our Best Advice

Schools with a clearly written philosophy are less easily drawn off course. Waves, trends, and fads tempt those who otherwise have no clear purpose for their behavior. The school's philosophy becomes the compass for staying the mission's course!

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Don't Expect All Children to Learn at the Same Rate

When a myth gets repeated and circulated long enough, it tends to become "fact." The most notorious and destructive education "fact" is, "If teachers will simply make the curriculum developmentally appropriate, all children will catch up by third grade, thus avoiding the cost of grade level retention or some other form of extra time." This seems to be the "truth" as reported in some research, but not in real school life.

To date, education experts have been unable to find one school, anywhere in the United States, where this has actually happened. This notion of "catching up" as a result of being taught developmentally is now being applied to the multiage continuous progress classroom. One well-known professional book on nongradedness even has a chart illustrating the catch-up effect on late bloomers by third grade.

This unbelievable phenomenon is just that: not believable. Well-intentioned educators seem to jump on any practice that promises to save money by eliminating the additional cost of grade-level retention and extra-year options. To our knowledge, there is no existing research to suggest that children will somehow catch up as a result of being placed in a multiage classroom setting.

The multiage classroom will not embezzle nature! Late-blooming children who enter school at varying levels of development will leave school with varying levels of development. The multiage organization will certainly not change the laws of growth and development.

One of the main selling points of the multiage classroom is the idea of additional learning time: that unequal learners can take an unequal amount of learning time in the multiage classroom without the stigma of grade-level retention. Some school systems are asking teachers to change from the old timebound lock-step single-grade classroom to "new, innovative" two-year time-bound classrooms. Multiage practices should not be timebound!

Our Best Advice ✓

The multiage classroom will negate grade-level retention, but will not eliminate the need for extra learning time required by some children who are "late bloomers." Social promotion is not an element of a true multiage continuous progress classroom.

Pay Attention to School Readiness Issues When Placing a Child

While we may all agree that learning readiness is present at birth, we also need to acknowledge that each individual develops at his or her own rate. For years educators have debated about whether all children should be ready to learn the same knowledge, skills and attitudes at the same chronological age. The answer to this question rests in the homes of millions of parents.

Parents have always recognized that siblings within the same family have reached widely held developmental expectations at different ages. They've come to accept the developmental differences of their own progeny. What parents have always known has now become the hallmark of multiage continuous progress classrooms.

In an effective multiage classroom, the teacher accepts as normal the diversity that exists in students' maturity, learning/reading styles and cognitive skills. Beyond that, the curriculum must be written in such a way that it becomes a path down which each child may journey, irrespective of her or his rate of growth — unlike the historic ladder which each child must climb at a similar rate or face grade-level retention. If the curricular expectations continue to encourage a lock-step, paper-pencil driven, seatbound behavior on the part of students, then nothing has changed. The curriculum must accommodate a range of development and recognize that students grow and develop at different rates.

The multiage continuous progress classroom adapts to the developmental stage of each child and allows children developing more slowly within these age ranges extra time; some learners in a first/second-grade multiage blend, for instance, may benefit from three years in the classroom, while others may need only two years.

Will a multiage classroom augment readiness? Or will children who are developmentally younger catch up with their age mates when placed in a multiage continuous progress classroom? No. What it will do is provide each child with a warm, nurturing, accepting environment where she or he can grow and learn at her or his own natural pace.

There are many resources available that help determine a child's readiness for school. One is the book, *The Kindergarten Teacher's Very Own Student Observation and Assessment Guide* (1996), by Judy

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Keshner. Others, geared for parents but certainly helpful to teachers, are: *"I Hate School!"* by Jim Grant; *Summer Children: Ready (or Not) for School*, by James K. Uphoff, June Gilmore, and Rosemarie Hubner; *How to Prepare Your Child for Kindergarten* (1993), by Florence Karnofsky and Trudy Weiss; *The Kindergarten Survival Handbook: The Before School Checklist & Guide for Parents* (1993), by Allana Elovson, Ph.D.; and *Kindergarten Readiness Checklist for Parents* (1991), a four-page, 26-item checklist written by Anthony Coletta.

Our Best Advice ✓

We must allow children the same courtesy that we allow all other living species to unfold in their own good time. Schools must become ready for each student, not the reverse. Remember—a student's beginning often dictates the end!

Create a Shared Vision With All Stakeholders

Multiage education requires a shared vision among parents, teachers, administrators, the central office, the school board and the community at large.

This vision becomes the impetus for change. The implementation of multiage education must have a clear, strong commitment based on what is best for children and how our actions must reflect our vision.

The vision must rest on the foundation of developmentally appropriate practices. The latest research and current literature clearly explains how children learn and how we must teach to help students achieve widely held learner expectations. Once the vision is clear, the stakeholders must draft a philosophy which details our beliefs and the principles which must guide our behavior. Virtually all future decisions will be based on our commitment to a common set of beliefs—our philosophy. Ultimately all staff development training, staff selection, teaching methods and materials, curriculum development, and assessment and evaluation will be influenced by the adoption of a schoolwide philosophy.

To the extent possible, the development of a philosophy statement must be a consensus process. Without consensus, implementation of multiage, nongraded, continuous progress grouping becomes very challenging. Without a clear commitment to the vision by all, confusion is the byproduct.

Our Best Advice ✓

Clearly articulate your vision, draft a set of beliefs and principles, and seek consensus and commitment on the part of all stakeholders. Only with a commitment to the philosophy will implementation of the concept of multiage, nongraded continuous progress be successful in the long term.

> "If you don't know where you are going, you will probably end up somewhere else."
>
> —Lewis Carroll,
> *Alice in Wonderland*

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Select Students for a Multiage Classroom With Careful Thought

The key to a successful multiage classroom is balance — providing enough diversity among classmates so that children may learn from each other and support each other, but not so much diversity that the classroom becomes unmanageable, and thus unteachable. It is crucial to balance the natures and needs of all the students, including the differently-abled and developmentally different.

The first rule for selection is to draw from a pool of students whose parents have indicated an interest in their child being placed in a multiage classroom. Nothing will jeopardize a well-planned, thoughtfully implemented multiage program more quickly than parents who have been forced to place their child in a program which they believe is not suited to meet their or their child's needs.

A classroom should also be balanced, whenever possible, in terms of age, number of students from each grade, racial and cultural diversity, linguistic diversity, a broad range of ability levels, and gender.

Much care must be taken when including differently-abled and developmentally different students in the multiage venue. Some communities are being told by well-intentioned staff and administrators that multiage, nongraded continuous grouping can replace or eliminate the need for special education programs. Wrong!

A developmentally appropriate multiage classroom may minimize the need for some students' placement in special education classrooms, but developmentally appropriate practices alone will not necessarily adequately meet the needs of high-impact children. These children typically may be behaviorally disordered, emotionally unstable, learning-disabled, economically disadvantaged, severely developmentally delayed or difficult children. To meet success, these students will need additional support and attention, requiring more of the multiage classroom teacher's time than her other students.

Realistically, these same students may need the additional services in the multiage classroom of the special educator, speech and language therapist/pathologist, occupational or physical therapist, school counselor, bilingual teacher, instructional aide or a parent volunteer. Too many hard-to-teach students create an imbalance that makes it harder for the teacher to provide good instruction to all of the students in the room.

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Parents should also know, and we must help them understand, that placement in a multiage program is an annual choice involving the student, the parents, and the teacher. All must concur for the placement to work.

It is important to remember that not all communities will reflect the diversity necessary to create an ideally balanced, culturally diverse multiage classroom.

Our Best Advice ✓

Assuring a balanced, teachable student population is critical to the success of quality teaching in the multiage classroom. This is one very important aspect that must not be left to chance.

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Don't Start With Too Many Grades

Have you recently awakened in the middle of the night with cold sweats and nightmares from the lack of sufficient challenges? or worst yet, from too little stress and misery in your life?

If the answer to this question is yes, then you may well be a candidate to teach a three- or four-grade multiage blend. As with all decisions about the number of grades to include when creating a multiage classroom, common sense must prevail.

Some experts suggest you need three grades blended together to be a true multiage classroom, while others fear that if they don't create a three-grade or greater blend, a teacher may continue to group students using the tracking-by-ability practices of the past. The rationale for this rests in the notion that creating ability groups for three or more grades would be too difficult, thus forcing a teacher to look for other ways of grouping. Neither concept makes sense.

Our advice is to start where you feel comfortable and build from that base. Sometimes our initial zeal and excitement for a new experience causes us to make choices that hindsight may later abhor.

Consider these simple facts: A three-grade blend typically will include a five- to six-year chronological age span, a three- to eight-year developmental range, and an ability range that can span 70 points (70–140 IQ). Although it's true that diversity is an asset when considering the potential for inclusion of differently-abled and developmentally different students, too much diversity will likely undermine the potential opportunities for all the students placed in the classroom.

While many states are encouraging exploration of different grouping configurations, including multiage grouping, they may still insist on continuing rigid grade-level expectations in their curriculum. As an example, many states require state history to be taught in fourth grade, U.S. history in fifth grade, and world cultures/civilization in sixth grade. The more grades included in the multiage class, the more difficult it will be to reconcile the demands of the grade level curricula.

Some teachers choose to handle broad multiage groupings — three grades or more — by instituting cross-grade team teaching. In this configuration, the team plans together, often centering instruction around broad thematic units integrating social studies and the sciences. The teaching team and all the students come together to share during the thematic unit, but otherwise remain in one of

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several multiage classrooms for the remainder of the class time.

Another challenge is how to effectively use specialists teaching music, art, physical education, computer, foreign language, and library skills within a more-than-two-grade multiage classroom. One of the most common reasons cited for discontinuing multiage grouping is the difficulty of accommodating the diverse range of developmental levels, ability ranges, learning styles, and personalities in these specialties.

Add to this the high number of students who come to school with learning disabilities, from families in crisis, with health and nutrition problems, with emotional problems, and poverty, and the diversity becomes staggering for some and just plain overwhelming for others.

Our Best Advice

When implementing multiage education, start with a two-grade blend and let your own common sense dictate when or if to expand to three or more grades. Success breeds success; start at your comfort level, and grow in confidence. Think big, start small!

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Offering Parents the Choice of a Multiage Program for Their Child is Essential — But Can Create Problems

A multiage program can offer parents a second placement option for their child's education. As Americans, we value choice as good, and it is often viewed positively by parents who feel that a one-year, single-grade classroom may not be best for their child.

Another set of dynamics may be at work in situations where program choice is offered to parents. Often the educators who have elected to begin the multiage program already have a positive reputation in the community. The word has gotten out that the teachers working in the multiage program are teachers many parents feel will greatly benefit their children. These teachers can be articulate and excited about the option they are creating for students and parents.

This is not to say that teachers not teaching in multiage programs aren't excited about their classroom programs and that they aren't articulate; however, new programs often receive the media attention while programs currently existing tend to be thought of as "the same old program," even though children may be receiving wonderful experiences in these classrooms.

When these parents are offered the chance to sign their children up for the new multiage program with a well-articulated philosophy run by teachers with positive reputations in the community, many parents jump at the chance. This can create problems in enrollment, staffing, and staff morale:

Student enrollment and staffing: When parents are given a choice about placing their child into a new multiage program, three different possibilities arise:

1. A sufficient number of students register for the program;
2. Too few students enroll in the program, which means that the staff members scheduled to work in the multiage program will need to be reassigned; or
3. More students enroll in the multiage program than expected; this will require either turning some students away or recruiting additional staff members to work in the program.

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These three possibilities should be considered before they occur so that staff members may plan for each eventuality. Knowing what will happen regardless of student enrollment will help to avoid hurt feelings and misplaced expectations.

Staff Morale: When teachers not working in the multiage program feel they are being unjustly compared to the staff members in multiage, morale can suffer. Teachers working in programs that don't get much positive publicity may begin to resent the teachers who teach in a multiage configuration and could sabotage the program in the community.

Our Best Advice ✓

Offering parents the choice of whether or not to enroll their child in a multiage program is one way to ensure that parents are initially supportive of the multiage program. Before beginning a program of parental choice, however, the entire choice process and the issues raised by a choice program must be considered. Offering parents a choice about what program their child attends can impact staff morale, staff assignments, and program size, and may affect the demographics of each program of choice.

An excellent discussion of the issues surrounding school choice can be found in the book, *School Choice: Examining the Evidence* (1993), edited by Edith Rasell and Richard Rothstein.

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Beware of the Class From the Black Lagoon!

Every few years teachers report an unusual natural phenomenon called "The Class From the Black Lagoon"—a class with so many strong, divergent personalities that it is impossible for the students to function as a group. Why this happens is open to speculation. However, when it does occur, we recommend that a dysfunctional class not be kept together in a family setting for more than a year.

Teachers find such a class difficult to teach and manage for multiple years. Some teachers report being so stressed every day that for the first time in their career they don't enjoy their students or their job! Teachers complain of feeling overworked and exhausted, with precious little time for themselves or their families. Even the most able teachers experience feelings of being assigned to combat duty.

Both teachers and parents together rightfully raise concerns about keeping a disjointed class together for multiple years. These legitimate concerns seem to center on the following:

- There is a lack of peer modeling opportunities.
- Inappropriate behavior seems to be reinforced.
- There is often a concentration of students who exert less than a positive influence on each other.
- Dysfunctional classes often have an abundance of discipline problems.
- Students who never before complained about their class now complain that they don't like their class or classmates.

Our Best Advice ✓

Administrators and teachers would be wise to recognize a dysfunctional class, redistribute the students to other classrooms, and begin their multiage classroom another year.

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The Multiage Classroom May Not Be the Best Placement for Some Students

The multiage classroom is not for all students, and certainly not for all parents. Some literature on multiage practices, as well as a few professional books, seem to suggest that every child will somehow flourish in a multiage setting. Common sense and logic lead experienced practitioners to believe otherwise. Most educators tend to agree that the following students may not have their needs well served in a multiage organization:

- Students who are easily overstimulated or excitable may find the active nature of multiage classrooms too stimulating an environment to work in. This group might include crack/cocaine-exposed children whose needs may be better served in a classroom with much less activity.
- Some children are by nature shy and introverted and may feel overwhelmed by more experienced peers who are very outgoing or boisterous. Feelings of being overshadowed tend to limit the potential of shy children. Placement in a multiage setting may not be in the best interests of these students.
- There are cases where a child is frail and easily intimidated by the mere presence of older, more knowledgeable and physically larger classmates. This child may often find it difficult to shine in the presence of "giants."
- Some students who have problems paying attention may find the multiage classroom much too distracting due to ordinary classroom noise level and visual stimulation. These students may experience great difficulty being successful when they are constantly bombarded with auditory and visual distractions.
- In some cases, children complain that they don't have enough teacher contact and attention. This may be due to a classroom setting with a student population that is too diverse developmentally. Some teachers report that they spend so much time working with high-needs students that other students feel neglected.
- A few students may have a poor attitude toward the multiage classroom as a result of being jaded by parents who aren't keen on the concept themselves. It is unlikely these children will be happy as long as they're assigned to a classroom that doesn't fully meet with their parents' approval.

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Our Best Advice ✓

There is no one best answer for every child. We set ourselves up for failure when we "sell" one truth for all students. Different learners require different programs.

Don't Assume Everyone Can (or Wants to) Teach in a Multiage Classroom

One multiage teacher summed it up nicely when she said, "Teaching in a multiage classroom ain't for sissies!" It is hard work — harder than teaching a single grade — and it takes very special people. We are often asked what attitudes and qualities a prospective multiage classroom teacher should possess. The following criteria, while not exhaustive, are fairly inclusive, and would be a good place to start a discussion on teacher selection.

When you are selecting the right person to teach in a multiage classroom, it is important that a teacher answer yes to the following:

- Be a veteran classroom teacher
- Want to teach in a multiage setting
- Think developmentally about how students learn best
- Have experience teaching several different grade levels
- Be a risk-taker and not fearful of trying something new
- Be open to "good" education change
- Be well-versed in whole child instructional strategies
- Love hard work and long hours
- Be comfortable challenging the status quo
- Not be afraid to jettison what doesn't work
- Not be a consumer of education fads, trends or waves
- Love developmental diversity among students
- Be a high-energy person with great sustaining power
- Possess a great deal of common sense
- Like collaborating with fellow teachers
- Be skilled at working with parents

The above attributes should serve to focus discussion among school personnel involved in selecting the staff who might be well suited in a multiage program.

Our Best Advice ✓

Only uniquely qualified, motivated members of the teaching staff should be assigned to teach in a multiage setting.

We do not think it is advisable for first year teachers to be assigned to multiage classrooms unless their student teaching has prepared them for such assignments.

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Involve Teachers of Art, Music, Library Skills, and Physical Education in the Design of the Multiage Program

When designing a multiage program, it is important to consider how the program will affect all of the staff members teaching students enrolled in the program. In their haste to design a multiage program, many educators have neglected to involve the specialists who instruct the children in art, music, library skills, and physical education. This can result in children experiencing an open-ended curriculum in the multiage classroom and a grade-specific curriculum from specialists.

If the belief is that students enrolled in a multiage program will have their academic, social, emotional, and cognitive needs met in a multiage classroom, then the belief should be extended to include nongraded, developmentally appropriate art, music, research skills, and physical education instruction.

Organizations for specialist staff are responding to the increasing demand for information on developmentally appropriate and multiage practices within their specialties. For more information, contact:

National Association for Sport and Physical Education
1900 Association Drive
Reston, Virginia 22091-1599

The NASPE is an association of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD). To order materials, call 1-800-321-0789.

Music Educators National Conference
1806 Robert Fulton Drive
Reston, VA 22091
703-860-4000

Center for Music and Young Children
217 Nassau Street
Princeton, NJ 08542
609-924-7801

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The Music Educators National Conference provides support for music educators from pre-kindergarten through the post-graduate level. The Center for Music and Young Children has a multiage focus, but deals with children from birth through kindergarten.

National Art Education Association
1916 Association Drive
Reston, VA 22091-1590
703-860-8000

American Association of School Librarians
15 East Huron Street
Chicago, IL 60611
312-944-6780

The American Association of School Librarians is one of eleven divisions of the American Library Association.

Our Best Advice ✓

Because many specialist teachers weren't involved in the study of multiage practices and may not necessarily agree with the philosophy, they are unsure about what a multiage curriculum for their subject should be. By involving all staff members in discussions of philosophy and program design, you can ensure that more teachers will be willing and able to instruct students in ways appropriate to the multiage setting.

Allow Enough Planning Time Before Implementation

Initiating and maintaining a multiage program will require resources. Perhaps the most important needed resource is time. The teachers and administrators who are starting the multiage program will need time to discuss how the new program will be set up and how it will function. In addition to all of the organizational demands of a single classroom such as room arrangement, supplies, and curriculum, educators beginning multiage programs often must adapt curriculum, decide how students and staff will be selected for the program, and work to create positive transition steps from the graded structure to a multiage one.

There are many ways to create common planning time for staff members. If the program is started through grant funds, part of the funds can be used to hire teachers during the summer months for program planning and curriculum writing time. Money from staff development can also be used to buy time for teachers.

During the regular school day, substitute teachers can be brought in to allow teachers, parents, and administrators time to meet. If a school has art, music, and physical education or library periods for students, it may be possible to schedule these specials so that one teacher's students are at art while another teacher's students are at music. This will allow the teachers time away from their students to work on planning and implementation of the multiage program.

Our Best Advice ✓

Murphy's Law states, "Everything takes longer than expected," and the change from a one-year single-grade classroom to a multiyear, multiple grade blend is no exception. The multiage classroom is a more complex classroom structure and therefore requires a great deal of time to think, reflect and plan. In order for teachers to make this reform as stress-free as possible and to end up with a high-quality program, we must prioritize and set aside planning time to do the job.

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Recognize That Parents Have a Stake in Their Child's Education

Without question, the parent is the child's first and most important teacher. Clearly, parents are critical stakeholders in their child's education. During the first five years prior to kindergarten entry, the parent nurtures, fosters, and models attitudes and behaviors which will influence the child's enthusiasm for literacy and learning in general. As schools, we must view parents as partners in the continued education of their child.

There are many benefits to having parents participate as full partners on our education team. According to Jan and Dave Ulrey, two prominent lecturers on multiage practices, children whose parents involve themselves actively in the school:

- do better academically.
- get along better with their parents.
- do more things with their parents.
- have a more positive attitude toward school.

Parents involved in their child's school:

- develop increased self-confidence and more positive attitudes about themselves.
- are more likely to enroll in a program to enhance personal development.
- have more positive feelings about school and school personnel.
- are willing to work for the school.
- are better helpers for their children.

Because of their involvement in their child's school, parents have a firsthand opportunity to observe the strengths and weaknesses of various practices and organizational configurations. These experiences result in parents who are more fully able to understand and make informed choices. Real estate brokers have long had an expression that suggests there are three critical conditions which affect the sale of a property—location, location, and location. So it is when parents are making decisions about their child's placement in different grouping configurations—choice, choice and choice.

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Bruce Miller, in his book, *Children at the Center: Implementing the Multiage Classroom*, suggests several incremental steps (with parents playing an active role) which can be taken to facilitate and improve the likelihood of successfully implementing multiage classrooms:

- Build a dialogue between staff and community about the purposes of learning.
- Assess existing practices, identifying school strengths and areas of dissatisfaction.
- Identify what information is needed prior to taking additional steps: research, school visitations, speakers, sharing experiences.
- Identify possible strategies and ideas.
- Build consensus around the direction for the school.
- Decide on next steps: staff development, piloting, and exploring.
- Identify how everyone will be kept informed and involved.
- Identify how support will be developed and maintained by the community, teachers, and parents.

What else can we do to more fully involve our parents on an ongoing basis? The following is only a start:

- Involve parents and teachers in planning and implementation, including research and visits to other multiage schools.
- Make use of parent organizations such as the PTA to communicate on an ongoing basis with parents; and to offer training in parenting skills, child development, and other child-rearing issues.
- Provide on-site child care for parents to allow them to attend meetings at the school.

Our Best Advice ✓

The fulcrum of successful school reform is parents. The change from a traditional timebound classroom to a multiyear, multiage organization is the most dramatic restructuring parents have ever witnessed. To successfully orchestrate this mammoth reform it is imperative that we have a full commitment and ongoing support for our efforts. This will only happen if we value parent participation and view parents as strategic partners.

Don't Assign a Teacher to Difficult Parents for More Than One Year

Finding world-class teachers who are risk-takers and willing to work extra hard can prove challenging to principals. When such a teacher is found, every possible step needs to be taken to ensure that this person can continue to be successful. This means the administration should take every feasible measure to reduce unnecessary stress. Coping with unreasonable parents produces undue anxiety and stress that can be debilitating. Asking a teacher to deal with these parents for multiple years will probably not be productive for the teacher or the parent.

Many teachers are quick to decline teaching in a multiple year setting unless provisions are in place in advance to assure that they will not be forced to cope with a difficult parent for more than one year.

There is one area of support about which a principal must be very clear: Difficult parents are often very time-consuming and can drain enormous energy from a teacher, distracting him or her from the important mission of meeting students' needs. The principal and staff should have a procedure in place to address problems that can arise as a result of a teacher having to cope with unpleasant parents. Knowing there is a procedure to deal with this type of unpleasant situation allays a teacher's fears and minimizes stress.

Our Best Advice ✓

There is a limit as to how long a teacher can work with an unreasonable parent. No teacher should be forced to stay with the same unreasonable parents for more than one year.

Recognize and Resolve Teacher/Student Personality Conflicts

The most often-asked question from parents is, "What if my child ends up in a classroom where there is a teacher-student personality conflict?"

Parents and students must feel that they have some recourse should a personality clash develop between a student and a teacher. Part of the implementation of a multiage program should be a procedure to quickly review any student/teacher issues or conflicts that arise.

Because teachers in a good multiage program receive training in cooperative learning, conflict resolution, and responsibility training, they are well equipped to deal with behavior issues — both the behavior of their students and their own. Well-trained teachers are more likely to honestly appraise their own part in a conflict, and respect the student's perspective.

Another concern often brought up by parents is, "Is it really wise for a student to stay with the same teacher for two or three years?" In view of societal changes in the past two decades, a multiple year placement for most students may not only be wise, but preferable.

In 1971, one out of ten children was born to a single parent. In 1995, the rate was three out of ten; in some areas of the country it's even higher. Add to this the fact that in most two-parent families both parents must work to support the family. If you consider that most students spend five and a quarter hours a day, five days a week, in school, it's apparent that the teacher becomes a significant adult in their daily lives. The bonding and trust that can develop between a student and his or her teacher is very valuable to the student's development and sense of security, and is only enhanced by extending the relationship for more than one year.

In placing students in classrooms, we should try to match them with teachers whose teaching styles are compatible with their learning styles. Remember, during the school day, the teacher is responsible for meeting the child's social, emotional, physical and intellectual needs. If it becomes obvious that a teacher cannot meet a particular child's needs, or that a conflict is developing that can't be resolved, the school should move the child to a more suitable classroom.

Everything that is positive about keeping a child with his teacher and classmates for more than one year can become harmful if the situation isn't working.

Our Best Advice ✓

To ensure that every child enjoys a positive, supportive relationship with the right teacher, review the child's placement every year. Our view of what's best for *the children* must always prevail. In a case where the conflict can't be resolved, move the child to a different, more appropriate setting.

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Provide Challenges for Gifted Students

Because multiage classrooms usually have a wide range of learner abilities and academic achievement levels, some parents are concerned about whether the needs of their gifted child are met in a multiage classroom.

Every child who enters a classroom deserves an appropriate instructional program. This is true for gifted children as well as for all of the other students who enter the classroom. The process for determining the needs of a gifted student is very much the same as the processes used to determine the education programs of other students, although the content, or the pace at which the content is taught, may be different.

To determine an appropriate program for a gifted child, educators must look at the individual child's area(s) of giftedness and build a program around this intellectual need. If a child has strong skills in language arts, the child needs opportunities to write and to read challenging materials. If the child is talented in mathematics, she needs opportunities to work on appropriate mathematical content. The child must be academically challenged, but in a way that does not isolate her socially from her peers.

Our Best Advice ✓

A gifted child is still a child. Make sure you challenge her intellectually and creatively, while providing her with opportunities for friendship and play with children of differing gifts and abilities.

We must also be careful not to take advantage of a child who is more knowledgeable by using the child as a free teacher aide.

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Realize That Parents and Other Community Members Care About Education

Most parents and other community members who get involved with education are well-intentioned people who truly want the best education possible for their children. Although educators, parents and other interested community members will not always agree on the specific details about what education is best for the students in a district, the tension created by such disagreements can, if properly handled, result in better educational programs for students. (See pages 16-17 on building support for your program.)

Change doesn't come easily or without growth pains. Parents and other community members (and some staff members) have certain expectations about what education should be. Many believe that grade level distinctions are an important part of a quality education. When expectations are disrupted, pressure groups often form to "right the ship" and block the proposed reforms.

Working with community members and community groups can be challenging, but rewarding. It involves interrelating with parents who have children enrolled in the schools as well as with other members of the community.

National averages show that only one of four households has any direct contact with the school; so sending information home with students only reaches 25 percent of a community. Many of a school's constituents receive information about what is happening at school from outside sources such as newspapers and radio and TV reports. Often this information isn't accurate, and sometimes, when the media's source of information is a pressure group, can be quite sensational. Without accurate information from the schools, false or misleading information, or disinformation, can become accepted as true.

Also, be aware that many of the terms associated with multiage programs carry very different connotations for different groups. In the book, *How To Deal With Community Criticism of School Change* (1993), authors Marjorie Ledell and Arleen Arnsparger list several terms that convey very different meanings to educators than to some community members. For example, many multiage programs use cooperative learning as an instructional strategy. According to educators, *cooperative learning* is:

Small groups of students working together in activities set up by the teacher to study, discuss subject matter, solve problems or complete projects. The teacher moves about the classroom, monitoring the activity and progress of each group and working with students as needed.

To some community members, cooperative learning is:

Kids teaching other kids with no active role for the teacher.

It is easy to see why some community members object to cooperative learning when they perceive the strategy as children teaching children with no direct role for the teacher.

Our Best Advice ✓

- Learn to communicate effectively about your education goals, programs, and events with parents and interested organizations, and to the community through the news media.
- Make sure you define the terms you use in describing your educational programs, so that people know what you're talking about.
- Be aware that some pressure groups may be using educational issues to gain political power. This strategy may not end up serving the best interests of the local school or the students who attend it.

Allow Teachers to Become Agents of Change, Rather Than Targeting Them for Change

One of the worst mistakes a school system can make is to force a teacher to teach in a multiage classroom against his or her will. To do so is a fast track to disaster. Such a teacher can undermine the concept of multiage education and cause the program's demise.

Many teachers make wonderful, hard-working, dedicated single-grade teachers, yet are not well suited to teaching in a multiple-grade, multiyear classroom. This teaching assignment requires an enormous amount of energy and commitment, and is a great deal more work than teaching in a single-grade classroom. Principals are advised to carefully select and assign only willing staff to teach in a multiage continuing progress classroom (see page 47).

In rare instances a principal will come across a teacher who is not only against teaching in a multiage classroom, but is adamantly opposed to anyone else in the building doing so. In this situation, a principal should consider transferring the teacher to another school or teaching assignment. Keeping this individual on staff could create unnecessary staff dissension and impede necessary education reform.

Teachers who find themselves assigned to teach in a multiage classroom, or who have volunteered for a multiage classroom but discover they are not meant for it, should take steps to get out of the situation as soon as possible.

We suggest the teacher ask to be reassigned to a single-grade classroom; in some cases it may be necessary for the teacher to request a transfer to another school.

Principals are advised to seek out the cause of the teacher's distress. The student population in the classroom may be too diverse, or too many high-impact, special-needs students may have been fully included. Redistributing some students, providing aide support, reducing class size or placing a special educator in the room full time may be viable alternatives to reassigning or transferring a teacher.

Our Best Advice ✓

A teacher forced to teach in a classroom against his or her will is still of the same mind. By assigning only willing staff to participate in multiage education, you greatly increase the likelihood of a successful multiage program.

Don't Confuse Combination- or Split-Grade Classrooms With True Multiage Continuous Progress Classrooms

The creation of a combination-grade classroom is often a response to financial woes, declining enrollment, or the need to reduce staff. A split-grade class is usually the result of an increase in the student population in one grade that creates a need to equalize class size by placing a few students in a different grade. Neither configuration is pedagogically sound or based on the needs of children.

When an administration finds this measure necessary it very often "sells" the concept as a multiage continuous progress program, currently considered to be education's latest best practice. Many teachers have made the best of a less-than-ideal situation by employing multiage practices and blending the grades into a mixed-age collection of learners. What has evolved, through the efforts of the classroom teachers, is a number of multiage continuous progress classes.

The creation of a combination-grade classroom under the guise of "multiage" is another example of doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. The combination/split grade classroom is not a true multiage continuous progress classroom and should not be billed as such.

Combination classes are implemented for financial reasons; they are not based philosophically on what's best for children. They result in:

- an increased workload for the classroom teacher.
- two separate curriculums to teach.
- double planning/preparation time.
- double record keeping.
- a serious time shortage for the teacher as well as the students.

The increased demands of teaching combined grades places a great deal of stress on the classroom teacher.

Combined-grade structures are usually a timebound, lock-step, 180-day configuration and are not considered to be a continuous progress paradigm. Often students are placed in a combination

classroom for only one year, thus missing out on the numerous benefits that accrue to being in a family grouping with the same teacher for multiple years.

Combination classrooms are also frequently a temporary configuration. This tends to undermine parent confidence, lowers teacher morale, and signals the public that once again the school has adopted the latest education fad.

Detailed discussions of problems associated with implementing and teaching combined-grade classes can be found in *Teaching Combined Grade Classes: Real Problems and Promising Practices* (Virginia Education Association and Appalachia Educational Laboratory, 1990); *The Multigrade Classroom: Myth and Reality* (Gayfer, ed., 1991); *A Common Sense Guide to Multiage Practices* (Grant and Johnson, 1995); and *Multiage Q&A: 101 Practical Answers to Your Most Pressing Questions* (Grant, Johnson and Richardson, 1995.)

Our Best Advice ✓

Always base grouping configurations on sound pedagogy, rather than budget considerations. Remember that multiage grouping is an education concept, not an economic one.

Don't Steal the Limelight From Other Good Programs Happening at Your School

There is great excitement about starting a new program. Teachers are excited because they're breaking away from some of the institutional constraints which have frustrated their teaching. Parents are excited because they're being offered options for their child's education. Because multiage may be something new and different in your district, the local media may focus attention on the program. This excitement and enthusiasm are important for getting the program off to a solid start, but — there is a negative aspect to this enthusiasm.

Unless the entire staff has been a part of the decision to implement a multiage strand, the excellent programs that already exist at a school may suffer from the excitement surrounding the new program. If the local publicity focuses on the new multiage program and neglects to mention the other meritorious programs at school, educators in the other programs often feel slighted; it's also possible that the community will infer—wrongly—that the older, established programs aren't as worthy as the new multiage program.

Educators enthusiastic about the multiage philosophy may be misunderstood by other educators who might resent the enthusiasm and publicity given to the multiage program.

Educators who create the multiage program often name it using an acronym which tells of the special nature of the program. Acronyms that invite comparisons with other programs can lead to resentment. Many schools have found it helpful to name each program with thematic names meaningful to the community instead of names which might lead others to feel that the program is elitist.

If a multiage program is being started as a school within a school, the principal must take special care to avoid a schism between the staff members of the multiage program and those of other programs. Before initiating multiage programs, interested staff members and parents often visit other existing programs. This invitation should also be extended to staff members who will not be teaching in the multiage program.

All staff members should be knowledgeable about multiage education — not just the educators who are teaching in the program. Since teachers working at schools with multiage programs will

inevitably be asked about the program and multiage philosophy, it is important that all educators be conversant in multiage philosophy and practices.

Staff development opportunities must be provided in an equitable manner. When multiage teachers receive training in multiage techniques, the rest of the faculty should be invited to attend; practices beneficial to students in a multiage classroom also benefit students in graded classrooms. Providing training in reading development, for instance, will enable teachers of both multiage and single-grade programs to see common student traits and needs even though the range of ages and abilities in the graded classroom and the multiage program are different.

Classroom resources should also be distributed in an equitable manner to avoid creating the impression that the teachers in the multiage program are the "chosen" teachers. If some teachers at the school perceive the multiage program to be favored by the administrator, the administrator will have a very difficult time convincing the staff that he or she values each member of the faculty.

Successful multiage programs often attract visitors. Principals who choose to accept visitors should accept them to their schools rather than to any one specific program. If the principal or curriculum coordinator only showcases certain classrooms, this can divide the faculty, as teachers could infer that their classrooms aren't worth showing to visitors. Such feelings cause dissension which can tear apart a faculty.

When principals offer the multiage program as an option for parents, principals must be clear about the advantages and possible pitfalls of both the multiage and graded structures. A potentially helpful exercise is to write out the advantages and potential pitfalls for each structure, and then view the list from a parent's perspective to ensure that the lists are equitable in their benefits and possible pitfalls.

Care must be taken to ensure that the differences between the multiage program and the single-grade program are differences between the programs and not differences between individuals who happen to teach in different programs.

Our Best Advice ✓

Present your multiage program as one of several fine options for learning in your school.

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Be Careful Not to Create Staff Dissension

When implementing any innovative program some dissension is likely. Staff who are uncomfortable with change may become professionally envious or jealous, or even have hurt feelings. But there are steps to take that can minimize the potential for staffwide upheaval.

Clear and regular communication is an important part of any faculty's group process. Sensitivity to issues which are upsetting for teachers can help avoid unnecessary problems. Here are some simple ways to avoid dissension:

- Be careful not to place only the gifted students in the multiage classroom. This will create the perception that multiage is an elitist program.
- Refurbish and remodel all classrooms (not just the multiage classrooms) on a two- to four-year cycle. Replace furniture in a multiage classroom when necessary, but not at the expense of needed furniture from a graded classroom.
- Class size makes a difference for all teachers. Be careful not to overload other classrooms in order to keep the multiage class room at an ideal class size.
- Assign special-needs pupils to the multiage class as you would a regular classroom. Always try to match the nature and needs of the special-needs student with the teaching style of the teacher. Ideally, strive to place no more special-needs students in the regular classroom than you would in the multiage classroom, and vice versa.
- Physical space is critical if one is to implement developmentally appropriate activities. But physical space is just as necessary for the single-grade classroom as the multiage classroom. Be sensitive not to assign another teacher's large classroom to the multiage program because it needs the extra space.
- Having a student teacher is both a privilege and a responsibility. A student teacher's assignment should to the extent possible be made based on what's best for the student teacher, not on lowering the student-teacher ratio of the multiage classroom. Assigning student teachers only to multiage classrooms can cause jealousy.
- Be careful not to make the multiage classroom the media darling of the school. Lots of great activities were cause for celebration in

the press before the implementation of multiage, and this will continue to be true.

- Encourage school visitors to visit any or all of the school's developmentally appropriate classrooms. Be careful not to squire too many visitors to a new multiage program which is just beginning; the program needs to take a shakedown cruise with minimal disturbances from well-intentioned visitors.
- Student attrition is a normal process in schools. Be careful not to favor the multiage classroom by not replacing students who have moved to another school. Nothing causes greater jealousy than class size imbalances.
- The multiage class is one of a number of good choices for grouping students at your school. Try not to oversell its potential. Every classroom in the school is suited to meet students' needs, and comes with both benefits and liabilities.
- Be alert to the danger of promoting one program over another. Featuring only the multiage program can give parents and the school board the wrong message. There should be a developmentally appropriate choice for every student, whether that be in a multiage classroom, a looping classroom, or a one-year single-grade classroom.
- Funding for professional multiage and related workshops and visits to other sites should be available for any staff member, not just for the multiage classroom teachers.
- Planning time is needed by *all* classroom teachers. Don't create a major division among the school staff by reconfiguring the scheduling of special teachers so that only the multiage classroom teachers get daily planning time. Recess and lunch duty should be shared by all staff, including multiage classroom teachers.
- Be cautious when naming the multiage classroom. Keep it simple. Names which sound regal give a sense of elitism. Names like the Primary Unit, the Intermediate Unit, the First/Second grade blend, and Mrs. Holden's Family Grouping are descriptive without being ostentatious.

Our Best Advice ✓

In most cases the source of staff dissension is obvious. It usually stems from not fully understanding the various areas that cause envy, jealousy or hard feelings.

A person's enthusiasm and excitement can sometimes cause care-

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lessness and unintentional hurt feelings. We believe that once innovative educators are aware of the dozen or so things that create staff dissension, these can easily be avoided.

Experience tells us that sooner or later tension caused by staff dissension eventually leaks into the community. This negative force will surely undermine your reform effort.

Think positively. Look at staff dissension as a wake-up call to pay attention to details and be alert to the needs and feelings of fellow educators.

Don't Expect Multiage Practices to Solve Every Problem in Your Classroom

We continue to search for the Rosetta Stone of education. Nearly 150 years ago Horace Mann proposed a way to more efficiently mass-educate large numbers of students economically. His assumption was that students who were of the same chronological age were relatively homogeneous intellectually; therefore all would benefit from the same types of instruction and would likely progress at about the same academic rate. The results of Horace Mann's thinking was the birth of graded education as we've come to know it.

Just as graded education has not met the needs of all students in the past 150 years, it is unlikely that nongraded education or its derivatives will answer the needs of all students for the next 150 years. As with any new ideas or beliefs our enthusiasm becomes infectious. Some educators tend to oversell an innovation in an attempt to have others give it a try. Some make grandiose promises and assurances that are neither supported by empiricism or validated using scientific research methods.

There is considerable danger in overstating the benefits of any practice, especially multiage, nongraded continuous progress grouping. There have been varying attempts at its implementation in the forties, fifties, sixties, and seventies; now, in the nineties, we are visiting the concept again. It may be helpful to identify what multiage classrooms will not accomplish so as to dispel hopes, wishful thinking and promises made by some who want to sell the concept.

- Multiage classrooms will not produce savings. Joan Gaustad, in her book, *Nongraded Education: Overcoming Obstacles to Implementing the Multiage Classroom* (1994), reports that implementing nongraded education can in fact be costly. She goes on to stress the importance of paying teachers to plan for instruction and conduct assessment, and providing time to train teachers to maintain teaching methods. Remodeling and refurbishing classrooms must also be added to the cost of implementation. Additionally, furniture, equipment and supplies necessary for a developmentally appropriate environment must be purchased.

  Be sure to budget money for staff development workshops, in-service and technical support, speakers and on-site visits to other

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multiage schools. The expenses' payoff ideally comes in reduced grade-level retentions, dropout rates, and fewer special education placements.

• Multiage classrooms will not skyrocket standardized test scores. Although Anderson and Pavan's extensive review of 64 research studies published between 1968 and 1990 concluded that 91 percent of the studies showed nongraded students performed at or above grade level compared to their grade-school contemporaries, a substantial increase in test scores was not evidenced. What multiage education does seem to do is maintain test scores at a comparable level to those of single grade classes, while providing valuable life skills such as the ability to cooperate with peers, increased self-discipline, and a sense of altruism and social responsibility.

• Multiage classrooms will not eliminate the need for extra learning time. The multiage continuous progress classroom ideally no longer groups students by grade level or tracks by ability level. Therefore, time becomes a positive factor in helping students meet their individual needs over the long haul. No longer is a child held hostage by 180 days, 5¼ hours per day and 13 years to complete their formal education. Learning is considered a lifelong pursuit, not just a school activity.

A multiage experience for one child may be a two-year experience, while for another it may become a three-year placement. No child fails, because there are no rigid lock-step grade levels to which a child must be passed, failed or assigned. Learning in a multiage, nongraded continuous progress classroom becomes a continuous process, hence the significance of the words "continuous progress" grouping.

• Multiage classrooms will not substitute for special education services. In their zeal to promote multiage, nongraded, continuous progress grouping with parents and the community at large, some principals and administrators have been known to sell it with the notion that it will dramatically reduce the need for special education services. Wrong!

It certainly may reduce the need for some students to be placed in special classes, or it may reduce the amount of special education interventions. The use of developmentally appropriate practices along with taking into account each child's personality, learning style and previous experiences has resulted in more meaningful instructional gains. The extent to which a teacher employs developmentally appropriate practices may help to determine the number of students who will need continued special services.

However, there will always be students who, in spite of all developmentally appropriate practices, will need the additional services of special education. Multiage is not the magic elixir for the eradication of special education.

- Multiage classrooms will not meet the needs of all students. Students who have not experienced making choices in their previous classrooms may need time and practice to make good choices. Further, those students who have not been encouraged to work together in cooperative groups or allowed to work for long periods of time independently may initially demonstrate difficulty using their new-found freedoms appropriately. Most students adapt readily and thankfully.

  Some students may not find success in the multiage classroom because it is their parents' feeling that they won't be challenged or will lack the necessary structure for success. Some parents fault multiage classrooms as unstructured, while the practitioner sees the multiage classroom as differently structured so as to permit continuous learning.

- Multiage classrooms may not make all parents happy. It is for this very reason that placement in the multiage classroom must be with the absolute consent of the parents. No matter how convinced the school and staff may feel about the ultimate benefit to a child, the parents must make the final choice. It is wise to remember that unhappy parents are very willing to share their unhappiness with other parents. There are lots of good choices from which a parent can choose in addition to multiage grouping. Don't invite unnecessary conflict!

Our Best Advice ✓

Experience tells us that the downfall or short life of most good education reforms often results from programs or concepts not living up to their extravagant claims. We must temper our enthusiasm and avoid the temptation to overstate the benefits of multiyear/multiage classrooms. The virtues of teachers and students in a multiyear relationship will speak for themselves.

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Don't Assign a Marginal Teacher to a Multiage Classroom

One question often asked by parents is, "What if my child is placed in a multiyear classroom with a mediocre teacher?" Though the possibility does exist, the likelihood is nearly nil; mediocre, marginally performing teachers seldom volunteer for innovative practices because of the extra work involved.

Most teachers who request a multiyear classroom, or who are assigned to one, have spent a number of years being trained to acquire the necessary skills to teach in this setting. It requires years and, for some, a lifetime of participation and training gained via inservices, staff development and graduate studies to acquire the skills necessary to teach in a developmentally appropriate manner. The marginal teacher often lacks the tenacity to stick with such a rigorous professional training regimen!

Still, the possibility, no matter how remote, does exist. What then? A safety valve should be established whereby all placements in every classroom undergo annual review. Every year each child's placement should be reviewed to assure that continued participation in the multiyear program is still appropriate and is still desired by the student, parent and the teacher.

We've all encountered a marginal teacher sometime in our careers. While it may be possible for a student to survive such an experience for one year, even the most talented and gifted child could not endure a two- or three-year placement.

Our Best Advice ✓

Each child's placement should be reviewed annually with the parents and the child. Principals must give parents their personal guarantee that no student will ever be placed with a mediocre teacher for multiple years. Parents deserve this assurance.

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Don't Misname Your Program—Some Names Will Really Hurt You

In an attempt to make a new program sound attractive and invitational, we often create alluring names or acronyms. Consider these examples: Silver Grouping, Platinum Group, Wonder Years, Bright Skies, and Shooting Stars. While these names may sound interesting and tempting for some, they may smack of elitism or favoritism for others.

Our best advice is to stay with words or phrases which describe the grouping practice, i.e., The Multiage Primary.

Listed below are several words and phrases which have been used to identify various multiage groupings.

- Mrs. Wilson's Wing
- The Primary Program
- The Intermediate Program
- Thematic Groupings
- The Multiage Pod
- The Early Years
- The Middle Years
- Mr. Black's Block

A cautionary note: the terms listed above may have very different meanings depending on people's previous experiences with them. Make sure you define your program accurately based on the terminology common in your school. (See pages 72-74.)

Our Best Advice ✓

The best advice ever given to us on this subject was from a veteran multiage teacher in British Columbia. She said, "Don't give your program any label; just don't name it!" That is good counsel. If you feel you have to name your program, keep it simple and call it what it actually is.

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Don't Use Inaccurate or Inflammatory Terms When Defining Your Multiage Program

Educators investigating multiage education often use a variety of related terms interchangeably. This practice has caused enormous mischief. It is important to be familiar with the nomenclature commonly used to describe practices indigenous to multiage education. The misuse of terms may create battles that need not be fought.

Some words bring back bad memories; others invoke a clash of values, while some terms violate a person's sense of tradition. There is a wise old saying, "When you raise a flag, you create a target." The following discussion of terms should help you more accurately communicate and describe your program to your parents and board members as well as fellow staff members. Applied incorrectly, they may undermine your effort to build support for your program.

Nongraded/ungraded programs: These two terms suggest what the program isn't rather than what it is. Very few, if any, public schools are truly ungraded. Nongradedness is more a philosophical ideal than an actual program. Most schools which consider themselves nongraded usually have many graded elements still in place. "Less graded" would be a more accurate description.

The terms also carry a negative connotation from the 1960s and '70s, when the concept of ungraded schools was attacked by the "back to the basics" reformers as permissive education. Using these terms risks labeling your program a "sixties reform."

Combination/split grades: These terms should be avoided — as should the practices the terms accurately represent.

A combination grade is not philosophically based on what's best for children. The decision to create a combination grade is usually based on a fluctuation in enrollment and the need to reduce staff. It is strictly a financial consideration. A split grade is very similar in nature, but is based on the need to equalize class size. Neither configuration is pedagogically sound in design, and is rarely supported by the teachers assigned to teach it.

Teachers in these classrooms are expected to teach two grades separately. This entails double curricula, double planning, double

recordkeeping, and double teaching. As a result, the students receive reduced teacher contact time.

Students assigned to a combination or split grade are usually with the teacher for only one year, and miss out on all the benefits of being with the same teacher and classmates for more than one year. Combination and split grades are not considered to be a true multiage continuous progress configuration.

Trial Program: The word "trial" suggests a program experimental in nature that has a fixed, limited time to work. This term undermines a parent's faith in the program, as it has the appearance of being not only temporary, but an unproven program.

Open concept: This should be voted the most misunderstood term in the history of American education! The education establishment has totally distorted its original meaning. In England, the term was used to mean open-ended inquiry. Something happened in its transatlantic journey; somehow in the U.S. "open concept" came to mean tearing down walls and creating a large open space for a learning environment. The results were often disastrous, as horror stories abounded about chaotic learning environments. Often the terms "open concept" and "nongradedness" were used synonymously and are now being applied liberally in some circles to describe today's multiage classroom organization. This erroneous assumption can have a devastating effect when implementing your multiage classroom.

Pilot Program: The term pilot program used in this context implies there will be a control group with pre-testing and post-testing. At the end of a two- or three-year period, the results will be compared and the findings reported. A pilot program is usually thought to be experimental in nature. Schools seldom if ever set up a control group for comparison with the pilot program.

Experimental Program: Few parents willingly allow their children to be part of an education experiment, especially if it is a major departure from the familiar traditional school organization. Parents value a good education for their child and would not take a chance on hurting him or her in what they may perceive as a risky, unproven new program.

Fad, Trend, Wave, and Cutting Edge Reform: Nothing will undermine the integrity of your multiage program quicker than your misuse of these labels. Unfortunately the public perception of many teachers is that they are "consumers of fads". We must be careful not to fuel this attitude. Too many taxpayers feel educators are always "picking their pockets" to finance the next major breakthrough in education, only

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to drop it several months or years later. Indeed, some of these concerns are well-founded. By choosing your words wisely, you should be able to minimize such criticism.

Our Best Advice ✓

Choose your words wisely and let them work for you to promote your new program.

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Realize You Can't Mandate Most Education Reform

Mandating school reform is one way to speed education change. Unfortunately, mandates offered as solutions to a particular problem often create a host of other problems.

Education mandates are nearly always created by "experts" who do not actually work with children and are all too often administered by bureaucrats from the top down. Education mandates often surface as a result of political pressure to "save our failing schools." Teachers and principals are frequently left out of the school change process, and their experience and insights never seem to be considered. This may explain why mandated reforms frequently offer solutions that go begging for a problem. The solutions simply don't match the problem.

Imposing mandates on teachers produces anger and frustration. Teachers complain about not being valued as stakeholders when left out of the change process. When teachers are not part of this decision-making process, resentment builds, commitment is often marginal, and the longevity of the reform is in serious jeopardy. For these reasons, few mandated reforms have had staying power.

Administrators are encouraged to bring together all stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and board members, to form a grass-roots movement to create lasting change.

Teachers must fully believe in a concept and be fully invested in a program to assure the chance of success. Without their total support, multiage classrooms are destined to join the ranks of countless other failed school reforms.

Teachers and principals are encouraged to analyze why previous reforms have failed. The evidence against top-down mandates is convincing. The change from a one-year single grade classroom to a multiage organization is a major departure from the traditional structure and cannot be forced on either teachers or parents. Change to multiage education must be well planned and may be best implemented when there is a converging of efforts from all directions. Rather than forcing a reform on teachers, decision makers would do well to create a multiage education initiative as an incentive for change.

Our Best Advice ✓

Mandates very often speed education reforms to their demise. This is why almost all forced reforms eventually self-destruct. There is a saying, "If you can't lead, then mandate."

We encourage education reformers to provide leadership, not dictatorship. The complexity of today's education needs lead us to believe that it is no longer appropriate to govern schools in an autocratic manner.

Don't Turn the Multiage Classroom into a Special Education Room

The child-centered multiage classroom is exceptionally well-suited for the inclusion of differently-abled students for many reasons:

- The wider age span and ability range as well as the range of developmental levels create a learning environment where differences are the norm. Students with differences, whatever they are, stand out less in a diverse setting.
- The instructional strategies used in a multiage classroom are child-centered and inclusionary by nature.
- Multiage classrooms are organized around the concept of developmentally appropriate practices.
- Multiage practices create a continuous progress paradigm that stops school failure and promotes success for all students, and are especially beneficial for at-risk learners.
- The multiage classroom is time-effective and efficient. Learning becomes the constant and time is the variable.
- Differently-abled students adjust more readily in a close-knit family setting and are quicker to be accepted by their peers when they stay together as a cohesive group for more than one year.
- Students of varying abilities and levels of knowledge can help each other through a wide variety of cooperative learning activities. This promotes an atmosphere of cooperation rather than unfair competition.
- Students can take up to a year of extra learning time in a multiage classroom without the stigma of grade-level retention or the devastation of school failure.

Because the inclusion of special-needs children in a multiage setting has so many benefits, there is a temptation for well-intentioned administrators to use the multiage classroom as a substitute for special education intervention. This can result in a classroom with a disproportionate number of special-needs children, which can overburden the teacher and cut into the quality of the learning time available for nonhandicapped children. A good rule is to place the same number of special-needs students into a multiage class as would be mainstreamed into a single-grade class.

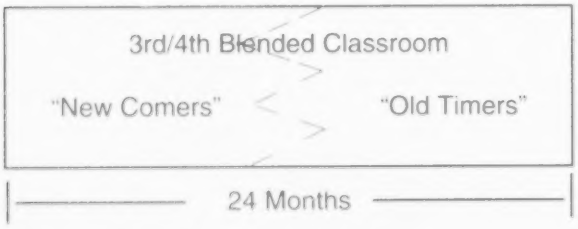
Our Best Advice ✓

- Don't overload your program with special-needs students.
- Bring special education support services into the multiage classroom to work with special-needs children and the classroom teacher when it is individually appropriate for the child.
- Continue pullout services for those students whose needs can best be met outside of the regular classroom setting.
- Recognize that there will always be students whose needs are so great that, unfortunately, they will not benefit from full inclusion.

Don't Overlook a Student's Potential Learning Disability

We must caution educators of the possibility, however slight, that students with an unidentified learning disability may be inadvertently overlooked for support services. In a multiage classroom, grade-line distinctions are eliminated or deemphasized, and bench marks or grade-specific goals traditionally found at the end of the first year may be postponed or spread out for more than a year.

An example of this type of classroom organization is illustrated in the chart below, where the teacher of a multiage continuous progress classroom (third/fourth blend) would postpone any third grade standardized testing until the end of the second year. Also, some yet-to-be-mastered third grade goals typically found at the end of the first year may give some students additional learning time by postponing requirements until the next year.



Grade-level testing and grade specific learner goals for newcomers may be transfered to end of year two for some students.

Single grade teachers know what concepts and skills students need to know at the end of each year. Multiage teachers, on the other hand, know what students need to know at the end of two or three years. There is always the danger that, when a teacher and student stay together in a continuous progress classroom, the student gains may be great, but not sufficient for success at the next grade level.

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With grade lines blurred and the structure shifting from a one-year program to a two- or three-year continuous progress program, there is a slight possibility that a teacher may inadvertently overlook a student who might have an undetected hidden learning disability. Teachers in a multiage setting may delay a referral while a variety of strategies and interventions are tried. This delay could set the student back academically and may do irreparable harm.

The nature of developmentally appropriate curricula and instructional strategies accommodates the diverse needs of learners. The multiage organization is "forgiving" for student differences. This wonderful attribute that works for differently-abled students can also actually work against them.

When teachers and students work closely together for more than one year the "halo effect" can come into play; the teacher can develop such a close relationship with his or her students that he or she may overlook a child's shortcomings or academic weaknesses and have an inflated perception of the child's progress and performance.

According to Gretchen Goodman, author of *Inclusive Classrooms From A to Z* (1994) and *I Can Learn! Strategies and Activities for Gray-Area Children* (1995), a child with a possible learning disability may show some of the following signs:

- Has difficulty retaining knowledge taught
- Requires a number of repetitions of taught materials (rate of acquisition and knowledge retention are lower than those of age-appropriate peers)
- Lacks organizational strategies to work independently
- Is unable to discriminate between important facts and details and unnecessary facts
- Is unable to remain attentive and focused on learning — inability to focus affects the learning continuum
- Experiences difficulties with expressive and receptive language
- Often lacks motivation
- Exhibits inappropriate social skills
- Experiences difficulty memorizing and applying new information
- Requires work load and time allowances to be adapted to specific need
- May display poor judgment calls
- May be unable to transition from one activity to another
- May learn best when taught through a multisensory approach.

Our Best Advice ✓

The education requirements of most special-needs students greatly exceeds the benefits provided by simply being included in a mixed-age setting with a multiple-year relationship with the teacher and classmates.

The key to meeting the needs of these students is "Multiage Plus." Place these students in a multiyear/multiage classroom with all the necessary special education intervention. It is never either/or; it is always both.

Resources

Multiage Organizations

National Alliance of Multiage Educators (N.A.M.E.)
Ten Sharon Road, Box 577
Peterborough, NH 03458
1-800-924-9621

N.A.M.E. is a networking organization for educators who want to share ideas, information, and experiences with others who have a similar interest in multiage and continuous progress practices. *N.A.M.E.* is also a source of information on books and audiovisual materials about multiage. Membership is open to those considering multiage as well as those already teaching and supervising it.

International Registry of Nongraded Schools (IRONS)
Robert H. Anderson, Co-director (with Barbara N. Pavan)
PO Box 271669
Tampa, FL 33688-1699
813-963-3899

IRONS is housed at the University of South Florida. It has been established to gather information about individual schools or school districts that are either in the early stages of developing a nongraded program or well along in their efforts. Its purpose is to facilitate intercommunication and research efforts. There is a phase one membership and a full membership.

Multiage Classroom Exchange
Teaching K-8
40 Richards Ave.
Norwalk, CT 06854

The Multiage Classroom Exchange puts teachers in contact with others who are interested in swapping ideas, activities, and experiences relating to the multiage, progressive classroom.

To join, send your name, address, age levels you teach, years of experience with multiage education, and a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the address listed. You'll receive a complete, up-to-date list of teachers who are interested in exchanging information.

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California Alliance for Elementary Education
Charlotte Keuscher, Program Consultant
California Department of Education
721 Capitol Mall, 3rd Floor
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Elementary Education Office and the California Alliance for Elementary Education have published the second and third installments of The Multiage Learning Source Book.

The second installment is a guide for teachers, principals, parents, and community members who are involved and interested in multiage learning. It contains descriptions of what multiage learning is and is not, questions staffs and parents need to explore before and during the implementation stage, samples of how schools have communicated to their communities about multiage learning, classroom curriculum vignettes, anecdotes from schools that have successfully implemented multiage learning under a variety of conditions, descriptions of multiage programs throughout the state, and current and relevant research and articles.

The third installment deals with evaluation of a multiage program and assessment in multiage classrooms. Copies of the Source Book are distributed free of charge to California Alliance for Elementary Education members.

California Multiage Learning Task Force
(see California Alliance for Elementary Education)

Much of the multiage learning effort in California is guided by the Multiage Learning Task Force, which is made up of California Alliance for Elementary Education teachers, principals, parents, board of education members and university professors. The group has provided guidance and material for The Multiage Learning Source Book and are practitioners of multiage learning.

Networks supporting multiage education are being developed throughout California, coordinated by the Elementary Education Office, which assists the startup of the groups. Once started the groups operate independently.

Under Construction
Jane Meade-Roberts
202 Riker Terrace Way
Salinas, CA 93901
Phone: 408-455-1831 (to leave message)

Under Construction's goal is to assist teachers, parents and administrators gain an understanding of how children and adults construct knowledge, and to support experienced teachers who are working to understand constructivist

theory and its implications for teaching. (Constructivism is a scientific theory of learning, based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development, that explains how people come to build their own knowledge and understand the things and people in their own world.)

The organization feels that multiage classrooms are wonderfully suited for helping adults learn more about how children develop and construct knowledge. Many of the teachers and parents in the group are currently involved in multiage classrooms or are interested in developing their understanding of constructivism so that they may begin a multiage learning environment for children in their own school.

Under Construction is an umbrella for several groups working toward this end. The Constructivist Network of Monterey County, which meets monthly, is largely composed of university personnel and some schoolteachers. The network provides a speaker series for the community. A focus group includes teachers involved in coaching and classroom visitations. The organization is collaborating with the local adult school to provide classes for parents of children in multiage classrooms, and has just begun to work with a new local university, with the object of working with people in the community. An advisory board oversees the organization.

The organization is funded by the Walter S. Johnson Foundation.

Kentucky Department of Education
1908 Capital Plaza Tower
500 Mero Street
Frankfort, KY 40601
502-564-3421

The Kentucky Department of Education has created a wealth of material, both written and in video form, about Kentucky's multiage programs. (Some are listed in the bibliography of this book.) For a list of available materials, contact the publications department at the above address.

Newsletter

MAG*net Newsletter*
805 W. Pennsylvania
Urbana, IL 61801-4897
email: ericeece@ux1.cso.uiuc.edu

The *MAGnet Newsletter* provides information about schools that have implemented multiage practices.

ERIC

ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) is a clearinghouse or central agency responsible for the collection, classification, and distribution of written information related to education. If you need help finding the best way to use ERIC, call ACCESS ERIC toll-free at 1-800-LET-ERIC. If you need specific information about multiage education, call Norma Howard at 1-800-822-9229.

A Value Search: Multiage or Nongraded Education is available for $7.50 and can be ordered from Publication Sales, ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 5207 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-5207. A handling charge of $3.00 is added to all billed orders.

Workshops and Conferences

The Society For Developmental Education
Ten Sharon Road, Box 577
Peterborough, NH 03458
Phone: 1-800-462-1478
FAX: 1-800-337-9929

The Society For Developmental Education (SDE) presents one- and two-day workshops as well as regional conferences throughout the year and around the country for elementary educators on multiage, inclusion education, multiple intelligences, character education, discipline, whole language, authentic assessment, looping, readiness, math, science, social studies, developmentally appropriate practices, special education, and other related topics.

SDE also offers customized inservice training to schools on the topics of their choice.

SDE sponsors an International Multiage Conference each July. For information on workshop/conference dates and locations, or to arrange for inservice training, write or phone SDE at the address or phone/FAX numbers listed above.

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About The Authors

Jim Grant is an internationally known educator, consultant, and lecturer who has emerged as the nation's leading spokesperson for school success.

His mission, since he began working with parents and educators in the 1960s, has been to prevent school failure. He believes all children can succeed in school when given developmentally appropriate programs and the learning time they need.

After serving as the teaching principal in a multiage school for almost two decades, he left to found The Society For Developmental Education, the nation's primary provider of staff development training through conferences, seminars, and customized inservice training, in the fields of developmental education, whole language, looping, multiage practices, and other related topics. He is also co-director of the National Alliance of Multiage Educators (N.A.M.E.). Grant is the author of several books, including *A Common Sense Guide to Multiage Practices* and *Multiage Q&A: 101 Practical Answers to Your Most Pressing Questions*, and a compiler of the new *Multiage Handbook: A Comprehensive Resource for Multiage Practices*.

Bob Johnson first experienced multiage classrooms as an elementary student in rural New Hampshire and Vermont. As a teacher, he chose to teach two separate, self-contained multiage classes — one 4-6 grade blend, and one 6-8 grade blend. He also served as supervising principal for five fully multiage rural schools.

For the past 20 years Johnson has conducted workshops, seminars, keynotes and inservices nationwide. He is a workshop leader, author, and lecturer, and serves as senior associate consultant with The Society For Developmental Education. He was instrumental in founding the National Alliance of Multiage Educators, and currently serves on the advisory board. He is coauthor, with Jim Grant and Irv Richardson, of *Multiage Q&A: 101 Practical Answers to Your Most Pressing Questions*, and with Jim Grant, of *A Common Sense Guide to Multiage Practices*.

Irv Richardson received the Maine Teacher of the Year Award in 1988 and the Maine Educator Award from the Milken Family Foundation in 1992.

After graduation from Dartmouth College, Richardson taught third grade at the Union-Sanborn school in Tilton, New Hampshire. He then moved to the Freeport Public School in Freeport, Maine, where he served as the teacher/director of the elementary gifted and talented program, and as the teaching principal of a nongraded, multilevel program for seven-to-ten-year-olds at Mast Landing School. He has consulted and lectured on multiage education nationwide, and has taught graduate-level courses on multiage practices.

As Program Director for The Society For Developmental Education, Richardson oversees staff development conferences and inservice training throughout the United States. He is also co-director of the National Alliance of Multiage Educators. He is coauthor of *Multiage Q&A: 101 Practical Answers to Your Most Pressing Questions*, and the co-compiler of the new *Multiage Handbook: A Comprehensive Resource for Multiage Practices*.

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